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Testimony in Response to Governor's Proposed FY 24-25 Budget for Elementary and Secondary Education

Rev. AJ Johnson

Senator Osten, Representative Walker and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee:

I am Pastor AJ Johnson, vice-chair of the Hartford Board of Education for Hartford Public Schools, and a longtime resident of Hartford. I'm deeply invested in this community and I'm eager to talk to you about the investments the state is making in Elementary and Secondary Education.

As someone who lives and works in this city, and fights for the people in the community, I am deeply passionate about ensuring appropriate resources are made available to support the young women and men in the city of Hartford. As a member of the Hartford Board of Education, we are responsible for adapting an equitable budget that ensures the effective, appropriate allocation of financial resources. As a Board, we strive to support the Superintendent in her management of the district in all matters relating to finances and policy.

Funding in various areas - from housing to mental health - can impact how students achieve in the classroom. That's why I was grateful to see that the Governor's proposed overall budget includes historic income tax cuts and plans to expand affordable and working housing.

Unfortunately, I was disappointed to see that the equitable education funding bill that would be a major asset to all our children was not included in the budget. House Bill 5003 would have been an important first step in ensuring the same resources, services, and opportunities that are available to students in wealthy districts are also available to students in our highest-need communities, like Hartford. That currently does not exist because of a lack of equitable funding.

I have previously voiced my strong support of H.B. 5003 and the funding of Education Cost Sharing, and I would like to once again explain the positive impact that bill would have on students in Connecticut. The funding from the bill would provide the resources and opportunities needed to make our schools a more desirable place to teach and learn. With the funding, Hartford Public Schools could lower class sizes, upgrade classroom technology, and provide more school counselors and social workers - staff members

who are so crucial as we recover from the long-lasting effects of the pandemic. The District would also be able to allocate more of the overall revenue towards school based expenditures, rather than general education tuition for residents leaving our district through Choice systems.

While COVID-19 relief funds have helped districts like Hartford start to recover from the effects of the pandemic, we know the problems will persist long after those dollars expire. H.B. 5003 would have allowed us to continue much of the work we are doing to address mental health, learning gaps, re-engaging our students, and more.

I would like to take a moment to applaud the Governor for incorporating funding for the Learner Engagement and Attendance Program (LEAP) into the budget. Hartford Public Schools has seen success as we incorporated this program into our comprehensive approach to attendance and engagement. Through district-wide efforts, including LEAP, attendance rates have increased by more than 30% thanks to the dedication of the staff who conducted deep analysis of root cause and went door to door to reach families at a time and place that worked for them. There is still a lot of work to do, however, when it comes to attendance. Unfortunately, as our COVID-19 relief funding expires, Hartford Public Schools will be severely limited in the ability to employ these programs with fidelity. The investment in this program is helpful, but it will not yield the same results we have seen so far if we aren't able to continue our comprehensive approach to engagement. Passing HB 5003 would go a long way to making sure we can continue the programs that have had a positive impact on our student population.

Sincerely,

Rev. AJ Johnson
Vice Chairperson
Hartford Board of Education